



northern water snake

Nerodia sipedon

Kingdom:	Animalia
Division/Phylum:	Chordata - vertebrates
Class:	Reptilia
Order:	Squamata
Family:	Colubridae

Features

The adult northern water snake typically is 24 to 42 inches long. It has reddish-brown to black markings on the back, which are bandlike toward the head and become alternating blotches toward the tail. Old water snakes may become very dark and lose their pattern—hence they often are mistaken for water moccasins. The red or brown markings on the belly extend to the tip of the tail. The body color may be gray to dark brown. Scales are keeled (ridged).

Natural History

The northern water snake lives in streams, ponds, lakes, and marshes. It eats fish and amphibians. It is active during the day in the spring and fall. It becomes nocturnal in the summer. It may flatten its body when disturbed and/or release large amounts of nasty-smelling musk from glands at the base of the tail. Mating occurs in the spring. Males locate females by using their sense of smell. In late summer the female gives birth to between eight and 50 young, depending

on her size (the larger her size, the greater the number of eggs) and age. When handled, most water snakes bite enthusiastically.

Habitats

Mississippi River; Missouri River; interior rivers and streams; natural lakes and prairie marshes; constructed lakes, ponds, and reservoirs

Iowa Status

common, native

Iowa Range

statewide except the northwest corner of Iowa

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.